



HEALTHY HABITS HELP BEAT HOLIDAY STRESS

The Holiday Season can be a time of joy and fun, but it also comes with more than its share of stress. And there are behaviors many of us associate with celebrating the holidays that are bad for us and can worsen the impact of stress. Fortunately, making an extra effort to include healthy habits in the holiday routine can help us feel better physically and emotionally.

Here are some tips for making the holidays healthier and less stressful:

Comfort foods are not so comforting. The holidays can feel hurried, with the shopping, travel, hosting and other things that have to get done. There may be less time to prepare food, so we opt for something quick and easy. We also may think this is the time of year when we should treat ourselves to our favorites. For many, that means foods loaded with sugars and fats. Don't let nutrition take a holiday. Instead:

- » Maintain a balanced diet.
- » Don't skip meals in anticipation of making up for it at a big holiday feast. It's especially important to start the day with a nutritious breakfast.
- » If you must have snacks, make them healthy ones – veggies you can munch, fruits, nuts, etc.

Watch what you drink, day and night. The common perception is that caffeine gives you that shot of energy you need to get you through when things are hectic and alcohol does the trick when you need to smooth out the stresses of the day. In fact, moderation is the key to both these beverages. Here are some reasons why:

- » Too much caffeine increases the level of cortisol – the "stress hormone" – in your body. And the "boost" your get from caffeine can lead to feelings of fatigue and depression when the effect wears off.
- » Drinking coffee or other caffeinated drinks in the afternoon or evening can cause sleep disturbances. This also worsens stress.
- » Alcohol's temporary calming effects are trivial compared to the damage alcohol abuse does to your health.
- » Water is the healthier and more effective drink when you're thirsty. If you reach for caffeinated drinks or alcohol when you're thirsty, you may be working against yourself. Research shows that drinking alcohol or too much caffeine can actually dehydrate the body.

'Tis not the season to give up exercise. The weather is colder, the days are shorter and the television schedule is full of your favorite bowl games and holiday specials. For those reasons and more, you're ready to become a couch potato for a while. But this is not the time to give up exercise. Keeping active is one of your most effective stress busters, and a little can go a long way. A brisk 20-minute walk each day can make a difference. If it's too cold out, try an enclosed shopping mall. Many encourage walkers before store hours. Some even have organized groups that offer camaraderie as well as exercise.

Give yourself a few moments' holiday from everything. One of the best strategies for beating holiday stress is to take a holiday from stress. Ways of doing that include:

- » Avoid bringing work home for the holidays. Give yourself a real break. Use your electronic tethers to the office – cell phone, pager, PDA, office email – only if absolutely necessary.
- » Try the basics of relaxation techniques such as meditation, yoga and progressive muscle relaxation.
- » Make room in your holiday schedule for quiet time – a few minutes each day when you do nothing more than relax, perhaps listening to soothing music or simply enjoying the silence.

Enjoy yourself during the Holiday Season. But take care of yourself, too. Make healthy habits an integral part of your happy holidays!

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